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C O N F I D E N T I A L SAN SALVADOR 000055

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SUBJECT: EL SALVADOR ELECTION UPDATE: JANUARY 16

Classified By: The Ambassador, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (U) Summary: This is an update regarding the Salvadoran municipal and legislative elections scheduled for January 18, and the presidential elections scheduled for March 15. This report includes criticism of (pro-U.S., center-right) Nationalist Republican Alliance Party (ARENA) campaign by influential party members, observations by the European Mission Chief, controversy regarding a new plan to verify the voter identification, OAS observations regarding the voter registry, and Salvadoran media coverage of a letter sent by U.S. Congressmen to Secretary Rice.

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ARENA MEMBERS QUESTION CAMPAIGN STRATEGY  
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¶2. (U) The El Faro online newspaper published an interview January 13 with ARENA party founder and former Minister of Public Security Hugo Barrera. In the interview, Barrera said that the ARENA's poor standing is a consequence of poor strategy. He said that people who are in charge have not been able to show Salvadorans the good things ARENA has done in the last 20 years. Rene Figueroa, Minister of Public Security and Justice, publicly called for ARENA presidential candidate Rodrigo Avila to review his political strategy after the January 18 municipal and legislative elections.

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EU OBSERVER MISSION DESCRIBES CAMPAIGN AS NORMAL  
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¶3. (U) Luis Yanez Barnuevo, Chief of the European Union Observer Mission, described the Salvadoran electoral environment as normal in an interview published on January ¶14. He said the FMLN strategy to spread rumors and the ARENA strategy to file complaints regarding illegal armed groups as typical.

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FMLN PLAN TO VERIFY IDS  
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¶4. (U) The FMLN announced January 15 a plan to distribute ultraviolet light scanners to verify the authenticity of voters, Unique Identification Documents (DUIs). Roberto Lorenzana, an FMLN representative, said that the electoral code establishes that the political parties have the right to watch the elections; therefore, the FMLN is entitled to use the necessary technology. However, Juan Jose Guerrero, Chief of the National Registry of Natural Persons (RNPN), said that his institution is the only one that has the authority to validate DUIs. In addition, Mario Salamanca, the Supreme Court Representative at the Electoral Tribunal (TSE), said that the FMLN plan is inadmissible.

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15. (U) Gustavo Fernandez Saavedra (Bolivian), head of the OAS Electoral Observation Mission in El Salvador, was quoted in local press assuring voters that the electoral list of voters and the voter registry coincide. He added the OAS will give more details about the electoral process after January 18.

16. (C) Fernandez Saavedra, head of the OAS Electoral Observation Mission in El Salvador, accompanied by Deputy Head of Mission Betilde Munoz-Pogossian, told DCM and PolCouns January 15 he viewed the situation on the eve of municipal and legislative elections as calm, a view he said was shared by the EU observer mission. He said the voter registry continued to be a concern, noting that large numbers of deceased voters continued to appear on the list, but this would have to be resolved after March 15 presidential elections. He said the TSE's data transmission plans to accelerate reporting election results could cause problems, but the system was not essential to an accurate vote count, something the OAS Mission will emphasize in its statements. He also said that he viewed the most newsworthy cases of electoral violence as more criminally based than political. Fernandez said the OAS would have 82 observers from 19 countries in El Salvador for January 18 elections. He said they anticipated issuing three written press releases on election day and, if a serious statement was warranted, that would be issued from Washington.

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MEDIA REPORTS ON LETTER TO SECRETARY RICE

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17. (U) Salvadoran media reported on January 16 on a letter dated December 16 from U.S. Congressmen to Secretary of State regarding the Salvadoran elections. The letter urged the Secretary to support the Salvadoran government and refute rumors of fraud.

GLAZER